

## **MEMORY PROBLEMS: WHAT CAN BE DONE**

**1. What is normal aging?** Aging can affect the brain's ability to learn and remember new information. However, in **normal** aging, these memory problems do not interfere with routine daily activities.

**2. What is NOT normal aging?** It is not normal when memory problems, including judgement, behavior and language, interfere with the person's routine daily activities, and when they perform much below the level they used to. Such a person may have dementia.

**3. What is Dementia?** Dementia is the term used for a group of symptoms. When a person has a dementia, they have a decline in thinking and social abilities that interfere with their routine daily activities. There are many causes of dementia.

First signs of dementia may differ from person to person. Here are some signs of the early phases of dementia.

- ☐ Asking the same question or repeating something again and again.
- ☐ Forgetting recent events that were important, such as a family wedding.
- ☐ Getting lost in familiar places.
- ☐ Forgetting to pay bills, or paying the same bill more than once.
- ☐ Forgetting how to cook familiar foods.
- ☐ Drastic changes in mood or behavior, such as from calm to tears to anger – for no apparent reason.
- ☐ Poor judgment.
- ☐ Having difficulty finding the correct word to use.
- ☐ Changes in driving skills.
- ☐ Doing unsafe things like: leaving the stove on, forgetting or walking away from lit cigarettes, or leaving doors unlocked.

**4. What is Alzheimer's Disease?** Alzheimer's Disease is one of the most common forms of dementia. It is characterized by problems in one or more thinking abilities, such as orientation, language or attention.

There are physical changes taking place inside and outside the brain cells that affect the brain's ability to function properly. With this disease, memory problems get worse as time goes on.

**5. What diseases have similar symptoms as dementia, but can be reversed?** Similar symptoms may occur with diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure, strokes, depression, thyroid disorder, alcohol or medications.

**6. How do you know someone has Alzheimer's disease?** A definitive diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease is made after death, with an examination of the brain. However, tests that look at other causes of dementia can be made. If no other cause is determined, doctors make a diagnosis of "probable" Alzheimer's disease. In addition to a medical history, routine tests that can be made include: mental status exam, neurological exam, laboratory blood tests, and X-ray or other picture of the brain.

**7. How common are Alzheimer's disease and other dementias?** Five to ten percent of people aged 65 have Alzheimer's disease. This increases to as high as 30 to 40 percent at age 85 and older.

**8. Is there any treatment for Alzheimer's disease?** Yes. There are medications that slow the progression of the disease; and there are medications that manage such behavior as uncontrollable anger, hallucinations (seeing or hearing things that are not there) and delusions (believing things that are not real). These medications should be given in small doses and carefully monitored by a doctor.

**9. What help is available to a person with memory problems?** In the early stages, the person can benefit from knowing about what to expect as the disease progresses, so he and his family can make plans. There are printed and video materials in English as well as in several other languages. Some people also benefit from talking with others who are having similar memory problems. Also, medication to slow the memory loss is most effective in the early stages.

In later stages, as the person loses more and more of his memory, he may benefit from being in an adult day program and, eventually, he may benefit from living in a nursing home where he can get more professional care.

**10. What help is available for families?** Families need to know what to expect as the disease progresses, and how to respond to different kinds of behavior. Information is available in English as well as several other languages. There is printed and visual information, as well as information on the internet. There are opportunities to talk with experts, and to talk with other people who are going through something similar with one of their relatives. There are programs designed to give the family member a break from the physical and mental stress of caring for someone with serious memory problems. Examples of those programs are: adult day programs where the person with the memory problems can be in a protected environment for half-days or full days; in-home support where someone comes into your home to help with daily tasks, including personal care of your relative. There are even residential facilities where the person with memory problems can stay overnight or even longer to enable you to take a vacation.